

Senior Distinction Project

Past, Present, Future:
Developing Kinesthetic Teaching Methodology &
Choreographing Experience

By

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A dancer's body is the instrument through which a dance is created. It is widely understood in the field of dance that the stronger and more flexible a dancer's body is, the more capable it is of a wide range of movement. I am researching the process of developing a teaching methodology centered around finding the necessary physical skills needed to successfully embody the core aesthetic qualities found in my choreographic work—specifically fluidity and the integration of a multi-unit torso by examining the use of pelvis and scapula; pursuing specificity in spinal articulation through the usage of isolated shoulder and pelvic movements. I am working to cultivate a specific teaching methodology intended to enhance my choreographic aesthetic, resulting in a choreographic work presented in Spring 2018.

I. Introduction

Before I began working on this research, my goal was to secure a job as a dancer with a professional dance company, post-graduation. I knew that in order to be a marketable, and desired dancer/performer, it would be beneficial to my career to widen my skillset, and identify the specifics of my particular aesthetic and style. Identifying my personal aesthetic is a major component of my senior project and leaves me to define what virtuosity in dance is for myself. After teaching a masterclass in Dr. Melanye White Dixon's Education course, I developed an interest in teaching my own personal movement style to other dancers, particularly the pedagogical element of navigating content parallel with learning outcomes to identify skills required to execute the movement material and my aesthetic. I have never trained with one teacher over a lengthy period of time, making my own style more vast and eclectic. It feels as I am a melting pot of movement styles, with the ability to be versatile, and adaptable towards other techniques and styles. My movement material never morphed into a particular aesthetic, rather, my style is eclectic, vast, and versatile. By starting ballet as a sophomore in college, I learned the value of implementing technical elements in choreography is important to me. I found the

virtuosity and security in codified traditional and classical techniques, which worked as a vantage point to start my research and guide my explorative trajectory.

Starting at the beginning of Summer 2017, over a period of six-weeks, during a study abroad program called Dance Denmark, I participated in contemporary dance classes, classical ballet, natural movement, hip hop (house dancing, popping and locking) etc. These classes introduced me to instructors who taught their own strategies and methodologies in their own styles. I knew that by taking classes in many styles with international teachers, I would gain valuable insight about structuring my own class. After taking part in the selective Dance Denmark program, I traveled to Lucca, Italy, to participate in the Dance Italia program. A three-week long dance intensive where I took part in daily technique classes and learned the respective company's repertory. At Dance Italia, I began to understand the distinctions between technique classes and learning repertory. Once returning to the states, with interviews, journals, and my experiences (memories, physical sensations, and specific journals after classes), I compiled my findings and examined them in two components: 1) a weekly hour-long technique class for a group of seven dancers over a period of fifteen weeks through the autumn semester, followed by 2) a choreographic process leading up to the culmination of the work "A World of Our Own."

II. Sourcing from the field

In order to begin the structuring of my class, I found it important to compile my information pertinent to the development of my teaching strategy. According to the International Association of Dance Medicine and Science, "a thorough and effective warm-up should take about 15-20 minutes to complete." After reading an article about the importance of a good warm-up by the International Association for Dance Medicine and Science, I learned a few of the key elements

that must be included in the beginning of a dance class to prepare dancers to execute all, and any choreography. Dancers need approximately 15-20 minutes of activity consisting of gentle pulse raising, light muscle lengthening and stretching, and a mental preparation to increase concentration and focus. I know from my own experiences, and having done readings, not to include static stretching to cold muscles during warm-up periods. Warm-up periods should focus on bringing heat to the muscles and an attention to becoming more aware of the entirety of the body.

I began thinking about the structure of the remainder of my class from interview with international faculty at the Dance Denmark and Dance Italia programs. I specifically looked at the activities and exercises I found effective, or ineffective, for myself as a student, and what other teachers said and brought insight to. I had the opportunity to interview one teacher, Morten Vinther, who developed his own teaching philosophy and created the Natural Movement class which he taught at Gerlev Sports Academy. His specific teaching philosophy interests me because he follows his students' subtleties and attitudes to gauge and tailor his class. Specifically, when Vinther first started working with us American dancers in Denmark, he caught onto what we knew naturally, as dancers, and what we struggled with. He tapped into this while teaching and shaped his further classes with this knowledge in mind. Natural Movement is the teachings of the physical human connection to nature and our surrounding environment. Vinther believes all fundamental human movement can be put into three categories: human survival movements (crawling, locomotive, climbing), manipulative movements (spears, bows, carrying, hunting), and combative elements (defending ourselves, the ability to hunt and kill, we cannot survive in nature without violence). These are the three principles of the natural movement philosophy with an addition to a cultural and explorative teaching method. Vinther

uses anatomical ideas and physical philosophies as a large aspect in developing his class structure. He also is extremely open to the idea of play, and believes that no structure should be rigid, as it should be malleable to fit the interests of the students for the day. In dance, play is very important because it helps us come at choreography with an investigative approach. In my creative process, I used the idea of play a lot, which helped create a link between the pedagogy and performance. Vinther gave some closing advice and mentioned that as humans we never stop learning. We continually grow and must use reflection and self-awareness to keep growing, especially when developing such an intricate class like natural movement.

“The brain has two jobs: The first is to keep you alive with basic metabolic functions: breathing, circulation, etc. The second job is to move or create movement.

The only way to affect change in the world around you is through movement.” –

Vinther

Having the luxury to train in a Gaga technique class was very important for my own body, and influenced my teaching extensively. At the Dance Italia Intensive, I took Gaga classes for a week and learned current Batsheva Repertory. I also had the opportunity to take part in the Gaga Winter Intensive, where I had multiple classes everyday, for a week. This experience influenced my artistry heavily, and I learned a great deal about my own body during these two experiences. Deborah Friedes Galili works to explain a typical Gaga dancer class in her paper *Gaga: Moving beyond Technique with Ohad Naharin in the Twenty-First Century*:

“Gaga/dancers training aims to prepare body and mind, thoroughly warming up the athlete and stimulating the artist during the course of a seventy-five-minute class. The improvisational structure of Gaga classes inherently supports this dual action. By allowing freedom to explore concrete directives and creative imagery,

rather than prescribing predetermined series of movements, the class helps dancers to develop the link between their physicality and their imagination, using one to inform the other in an ongoing feedback loop.” (Galili 384)

Gaga training brought out a curiosity in my dance training centered around finding availability and mobility in all of the joints in my body simultaneously. Articulating specific body parts and involving the body in totality creates virtuosity that is visible through the immense physicality. A diverse range of physicality becomes useful in Gaga classes, though the difficult part is tapping into the many physicalities and discovering them within personal movement style. For example, dancing with the shoulders and scapula leading, but adding residual involvement in the elbows, hands, and wrists, demonstrating the energy flow through the arms via the physical connection of the skeletal and muscular system. Influenced by this particular movement ideology, I implemented a warm-up sequence in my technique class which guided each student in a bodily investigation centered around finding joint space, availability, and mobility, all concurrently. The sequential, fluid, serpentine quality in my own dancing was strengthened by taking Gaga technique classes, but I wanted to find ways to share this with students in my class. I began to realize how important fluidity became to me and my movement style. A common correction I would receive in ballet, Cunningham, and other dance training through my undergrad was to “stop moving in pieces, sequentially, and to move all at once.” I began to question myself and ask about the plausibility of moving in separate pieces when my body itself is one piece and all of my joints are connecting every part of my body. I have come to understand that to find virtuosity in the segmented and fluid aesthetic, it requires training and sensibilities to find the strength to maintain an engagement in specific muscles, while finding release in others to access the fluid and endless quality.

Through an informal interview and casual conversation with my teacher at Dance Italia, Chisato Ohno, I gathered insight on how she teaches her Gaga classes. Ohno has been teaching Gaga since 2005, and states that teaching the technique requires a large understanding of the practice, and it needing to become nearly spiritual for the teacher during every practice. Once the practice and technique becomes more ritualistic, like a daily practice, it will become easier to teach. Ohno says that her main goal is to make people feel warm, and feel possible to move, striving to bring them to a place of availability and readiness. Ohno never fully plans a particular class, she decides small aspects or criteria to touch on, but generally structures class based on how people are responding. There was one class when Ohno came into the studio to begin class, but all of us dancers remained on the floor, tired, and a little defeated. She tapped into this energy, by having us start on the floor, talking to us about simply noticing our energy levels and what our bodies feel like they need, but not commenting on it. The idea of simply noticing and acknowledging is common for the Gaga practice. In the words of Chisato, “we had to listen, and specifically listen to our body. Just let it move through the space and focus on the task at hand.” There is a sense of staying objective through the class, without making critique or comment about what our bodies are doing, but to just notice, and let it happen. After speaking with Chisato Ohno, I realized that Gaga Technique is not a movement aesthetic, nor a way, style of movement, but it is a way of feeling your body and engaging within your physicality.

Speaking with both teachers initiated a pedagogical reflective process that brought me closer to developing my own pedagogical style. I found, from both teachers, that it is extremely important to listen to the needs of your students. To me, an invested teacher is one who keys into the needs of the students, and is able to modify for the needs of the students in the present moment. This became a very crucial process throughout the development of my pedagogy, and

became even more imperative in my creative process. I had to stay transparent, honest, and open with my cast, otherwise a wall would be built, and connections could be severed and lost. My sourcing brought me the ideas of compassion, and taught me to implement humanistic qualities into my teaching. Ultimately, I am a person, who is teaching my own knowledge to other people; in no way should I make this process demeaning or debilitating, but only ever make my students feel welcomed and inclusive throughout all parts of the process.

III. Developing a Pedagogy

The central question in my pedagogic research is: what specific skill-sets and/or physical qualities does a dancer need to successfully engage in my choreographic process and perform my work with confidence? In my teaching methodology and choreographic aesthetic, I wanted to focus on the movement pathways traveling throughout the spine. The spine is integral in movement because it holds the main infrastructure of the body. All movement that happens anywhere in the body, proximally or distally, including talking and gesturing, is either explicitly or implicitly involving the spine. All movement in the body is controlled by the frontal lobe of the brain, sent through the spinal cord via neurotransmitters into the muscles and limbs (implicitly involving the spine). Furthermore, I wanted to examine and visually demonstrate the sequential element within the movement pathway from the brain to the limbs in my choreography.

Signals from the brain must cross the midline of the body to initiate movement on the other side of the body. To demonstrate this, I continually talked of a serpentine, or snake like quality to describe the movement material to blur the line of a clear vertical and central axis; encouraging a stepping away from strict verticality. I am looking to teach proprioception, and mirror the speed of which neurons are firing. This type of verbal cueing helped dancers to find

clarity in the movement material and further visualize the conceptual elements for the audiences. By encouraging dancers to demonstrate this pathway, I am fostering a heightened self-awareness within the dancer, allowing the visual tracking of this physicality. By giving my dancers the liberty to embellish movements and use an explorative process, they find what suits their bodies most effectively and are encouraged to format the movement accordingly. I am looking to uncover how my dancers can personally embody, physicalize, and develop the choreography to further demonstrate the idea of a highly kinetic mobile spine. Below I will go into details of my strategies and pedagogy.

Warm Up: Here I concentrated on dynamic stretching, joint lengthening, moderate pulse raising. I found myself developing a pattern of beginning class with an accumulative warm up that includes, light stretching and lengthening (forward bend, downward facing dog, etc.), strengthening (pushups, taking and shifting weight onto hands, and initiating the engagement of the core via planks and verbal cueing), as well as a gentle heart rate and pulse raising section (increasingly faster transitions through the accumulative warm up as the progression advances). I then guided the students to the floor to incorporate more joint-lengthening and full-bodied movement—intending on giving the students an opportunity to ground themselves into the floor through weight releasing exercises influenced by principles of Bartenieff fundamentals. In reflecting on this, I realized that in planning my warm-up, I assumed my students were familiar with Bartenieff principles and understand how to structure themselves within an X and other forms of release work. The majority of my dancing and choreography incorporates an expansive Kinosphere and implements the act of reaching and sending energy out through the limbs. Therefore, it is important to find the full length of the limbs while on the floor because there is

the provided support of gravity, creating more leniency and less rigidity in structure. This creates a precedent in the beginning of class in regards to engagement of specific and essential muscles, while releasing and relaxing other nonessential muscles training a fine tuning in physicality.

To further train the fine tuning of engagement and release in specific muscles, I move into a further dynamic warm-up series including imagery and softening into the floor. I use specific imagery in my speaking about “letting the weight pour below the floor.” This is to get dancers engaged more in the release of muscles, therefore when they move to standing, there is less tension held in the muscles, making movement more efficient and effortless—two qualities that promote sequential articulation. While working in an X, I cue dancers to release below the floor and ask that they find a shake deep in their core, between their belly button and pelvis. I ask that dancers determine intensity of the shake based on my verbal cueing. “An engine the size of a cherry is powering the shake deep in your pelvis. An engine the size of an apple, a melon, an engine that could power a small car.” This specific exercise makes dancers find release in the distal limbs, because they are focusing on the imagery of the movement, and the sensations it creates. To further increase heart rate and raise dancers to standing, I use an improvisational exercise which I first learned from Sofie Clemmensen in her Contemporary Technique class. I cue dancers to soften to standing and soften below the floor in 10 seconds, then 9 seconds, then 8 seconds, etc.

Standing Centering: In this section, I move into a more classic sequence including plies, tendus, and degages for dancers to find the alignment of their body. In order for dancers to feel confident in off-balanced movements, they must feel comfortable on balance. These exercises include intricate footwork, as well as a specific spinal articulation piece added as a coda to the foot exercises. This spinal articulation phrase uses the head as an initiation point and works to

help dancers find the serpentine or fluid-like quality moving through the spine. This phrase helps dancers experience undulation, or wave-like locomotion, specifically in the spine.

Afterwards, I move into a swinging combination to help dancers work towards comfort in off-center dancing. Typically danced as a $\frac{3}{4}$ meter, this exercise helps dancers find the depth and volume in their dancing. This works to find buoyancy and pliability in the plié. I am very focused in the articulation of the feet and using the feet more holistically as 3-dimensional, rather than flat footed, or thinking of the feet as only the toes and heel. I challenge dancers to think of their feet as having the same ability to bear weight and articulate similarly to our hands. The idea of articulate feet and absorption into and across the floor became a very common theme while teaching Contemporary 3. I continued to talk about the subtle weight shifts that happen consistently between the two feet, but letting the weight pour out through the soles of the feet, laterally, medially, and softening down through the bottom of them. The feet should have just as much mobility as the hands and can be articulated through the ankle joint, toes, and balls of the feet, rather than thinking of them as two dimensional with only point and flex as actions.

Improvisation: I cue dancers into an exploration centered on finding mobility and availability in the joints, focusing on the use and articulation of the spine, scapula, and pelvis. Depending on skill level of dancers, we either focus to find release into the floor, or we look to find simultaneous movement in the joints, articulation and fluidity in the spine, or specific proximal initiation. The improvisation is centered around moving from specific body parts. I guide dancers through different parts of their bodies, and dancers react and explore these parts of their bodies. Imagery is extremely helpful in this section of class. When working with the head I urge dancers to “pour sand out of their ears” to help find balance off center, and promote movement away from symmetry and verticality. At points, I did not notice that dancers were infatuated with the

mirror, until it had become too far into the improvisation. I noticed that once beginning this part of my class, I had to close the mirror to encourage more connection and conversation within the body. I struggled, personally, with doing this, as it felt like it broke up the flow and sequence of the class; an aspect I had worked very hard on teaching. Moving into the final combination, I needed the mirror to teach, making a swift water break while opening it, but it still like a disruption.

Final Combination or Choreography: This is a very diverse section focused on dancing and moving to set choreography. The choreography itself had been influenced by previous exercises in class, but mostly contained set material from within the piece presented in Senior Concert. When teaching to the contemporary 3 class, I used this time to work on different dynamics within the choreography teaching the use of expansive Kinosphere and depth within pli  . While teaching the choreography to dancers, I noticed that my verbal cueing is extremely anatomical in my language. For example, I may say “start with shrugging the scapula up the back, and let the energy flow throughout the arms into the fingertips, feeling the weight of your head fall slightly backward.” After teaching choreography multiple times, I found that I continued to implement three concepts into my class: origin of movement, articulation and specificity, and fluidity.

To promote specificity, I teach dancers clarity within their movement, and ask them to be specific and articulate about what parts of the body they are moving at once. When dancers are performing or executing my choreography, it is important for dancers to be specific and articulate each part of the body to create visibility. By having specificity and articulation, dancers are further able to demonstrate pathways from the origin of movement, or the brain. In regards to articulation, dancers should be clear about what parts of the spine are moving at a time, whether it is the cervical, thoracic, or lumbar, but they also must be very articulate within their feet. By

having articulation in their feet, they are more apt to demonstrate the weight shifts within their body, making it easier to move nimbler through space. This will promote agility and speed while dancing, while working to find the balance of moving quickly, but clearly while executing the choreography.

I urge dancers to strive towards finding fluidity in their movement quality through the entire time they are dancing. This fluidity includes a connectedness through the entire body. When continually using this word, eventually I found that the fluidity simply means not stopping and moving continuously through every movement together. We are looking to take out the segmented or jagged qualities in movement, and make movement more full through roundness, swirls, and circles. When presenting movements, dancers should have a seamless through line in their dancing, making it difficult to pinpoint a specific beginning and ending in each movement. I constantly use the imagery “serpentine spine” or “moving through water” when explaining movement qualities and dynamics to the dancers. The dynamic is constantly shifting by the environment the dance is being performed in, such as music or energy level, but the quality should constantly search for seamless, and fluid. These three concepts come across in the improvisation that I include, using imagery, but then directly repeating this imagery in the final combination to help reinforce these concepts.

IV. Creative Process

The creative process was happening throughout the entire time of the pedagogical investigation. I continued to use movement material that was developed and taught in my class, but broke it down even more specifically in regards to anatomy. Eventually, the choreography became much more about individuality within their own body, and finding the pathways that

worked best for each dancer i.e. letting the dancers collaborate with me in the composition. In class, the cast is focused on themselves, getting into our own bodies, finding their own physicality and preparing the body for the choreography and creative process. I taught the class beforehand to warmup my dancers and promote a sense of how to move within the piece. This was similar to the ideology of taking a technique class, and letting that influence the way we approach repertory material. The creative process stems from the choreography because specific formal aspects are derived from class, i.e. weight shifts, rolling through feet. Though it then became more important to be aware of the other people in the space because they are now dancing with each other. This was the nature of the work, a group effort and group aspect.

When moving from the pedagogy into the rehearsal, the transition to first and second semester, I had a large struggle. Towards the end of the first semester, I was surprised by a showing and was very under prepared when I heard about it. I, quickly, threw what little material I had at the moment on stage, and made my dancers work to perform a small snippet. I had music picked out, but decided to switch it on them right before showing because other pieces had similar music; I wanted my dance to be different than my peers. Moving into second semester, with a well deserved break from school work, I had the ability to think about the composition of my piece. I decided on music, and started to weed in and out the properties from my class which I wanted to include in the choreography. The dancers queued into this music much more and found the qualities that I had been urging to teach them. The previous, driving music, seemed to push them into a different head space, even though I loved it for the choreography and energy on stage. By having time to think through ideas of structures to explain to my dancers, they understood that we were implementing ideas from my class, into the piece, which helped to find clarity within the movement. By teaching a class for the first 15 weeks, I taught my dancers a

style of movement, therefore, in the second semester I could focus on the composition of the piece, rather than the physicality.

I found that when I was not in the studio, dancers felt the ability to be more creative and take on their own embellishments. There were rehearsals where the dancers were prompted to rehearse on their own, guided with a set of specific notes to go through. These rehearsals seemed to be geared more towards refining and understanding more specifics about what I was asking of the dancers. The sheets I gave the dancers instructed them how to hold rehearsal, and continue to work, while I was not present. An example of a note from the list was “Sutton & Ali – just move through the duet the first time a little bit quicker, and find a more organic way of moving up from the ground. Maybe you circle around yourself, but don’t lose the quality built from the entire piece simply because you are standing up.” With comments like this in my notes, the dancers felt creative license to explore, and find what worked naturally within their bodies. I believe that the creative process should stand as more of a collaborative process, and allow the dancers to feel welcomed to have their own artistic input. Each time I guided dancers to work independently with the notes, the piece became much clearer, and it started to grow and shape more to fit my dancers. In a later rendition, I would certainly make notes like this again, but come into the studio with the dancers to explain more in-depth. It provides an outline for the dancers to follow, but can also create confusion for the dancers. I noticed that sometimes my dancers felt as though there were more corrections when I gave notes like this to them, but it was the easier way to ensure that the dancers had things to work on while I was absent from rehearsal.

A note that I continued to get from my dancers, were that they were extremely confused and challenged with the intention of the piece, and the ‘meaning’ of the movement material. The

work created was titled *A World of Our Own*, and explored the atmosphere that was created by the dancers within the piece. Each time the dancers continued to ask me about the meaning of the piece, and intention behind the movement, I explained that the intention is driven by the internal sensation that is created by doing the movement. There is not an aboutness, but there is a sense of taking pride and ownership of the movement that is happening all of the time within our bodies. Our bodies have a consistent flow of energy traveling through it at all times, and the piece explores the personal sensations and feelings of these energies. It is not a performative piece that confronts the audience, but it is about the world that the dancers have created as a community. I continued to explain to my dancers to take ownership of the movements and embellish anything they need to make the movement feel more personal and individual. It was difficult to have the dancers grasp the idea of taking over a piece, when the piece is choreographed by someone else. I believe a lot of this has to do with the young age of the dancers, and with maturity will come more security and the ability to make creditable artistic choices while dancing and performing.

V. Concluding Thoughts

Looking back at the process, I learned a lot about myself as an artist, performer, and teacher. The work I created was a direct stemming of my teaching strategies. I used the teaching methodologies that I created in the first semester, to set a precedent about how to hold my rehearsal process. The class creates a model in regards to approaching the choreography. Though, this can also be detrimental because it can be difficult to deviate from this form if I am asking for different qualities. I learned that I value specificity in choreography, meaning details and parameters around space, time, and energy. I love the idea of freedom and individuality,

rather than strict guidelines in movement, letting the dancers collaborate and be themselves. It was extremely important for me to spend time in a studio investigating my own personal style, aesthetic, and understand what I value. This process provided me the ability to deeply look at my own strategies and provide a critical analysis and reflection of these strategies.

In my teaching methodology, I encourage my students to take ownership of their bodies, and explore what is being offered to them in this moment. This is what I encourage my dancers to do during the creative process. I am focused on the energies traveling throughout the body, and want to demonstrate these sequential pathways visually. The choreography is a direct example of the exploration that is put into the class. I specifically used material from class, within the piece, therefore the dancers would feel more comfortable doing the movements. By teaching a class and having rehearsal immediately following, I noticed a shift in the way my dancers executed the movement. I saw them using information from the class and implementing it into the choreography. This created a similar aesthetic and style of movement across all of the dancers throughout the duration of the piece.

Looking to the future, I have solidified the fact that I want to perform and dance professionally with a company or choreographer who is going to provide me with specificity and the ability to embellish choreography to fit and tailor to my own body. Going into my post graduation plans at professional training programs, I now have a more tailored idea of my own 'style.' Contemporary dance is a wide world and is all encompassing. I will go into these eclectic, vast, training programs, while having a skill set that is also eclectic, vast, and all encompassing.

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